

issue 6
april 2009

Angie's Story

How is it possible that I have arrived at this particular week in March 2009 to realise that I have left church; that I have been almost imperceptibly leaving for a very long time? Drastic changes like this just don't happen when you are 54, have been a committed Christian since a real conversion experience aged 12, and have spent all your adult life involved both in church ministry and running a thriving para-church organisation with your husband.

For several months I have been looking back over my life trying to make sense of my faith journey and coping with the gamut of frequently extremely painful thoughts and emotions that have come to the fore.

The following strands have emerged as significant:

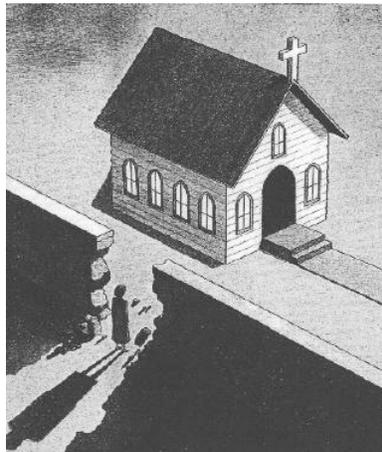
- **Doctrinal changes.**

Key doctrines that I had received, accepted and had been part of my world view have been changing for over 14 years. For example, I realise that I no longer believe in a literal hell to which everyone who isn't in the Christian lifeboat is destined. I can not accept

the traditional, evangelical (and some Anglo-Catholic) views of women's ministry and find them to be an intolerable straight jacket. My traditional views on homosexuality have been turned upside down as I read new research from 'New Scientist' and have made deep, meaningful friendships with homosexuals at work. And I find it impossible to understand how thinking, intelligent people can believe in creationism. And there continue to be ongoing challenges to my belief system.

- **Family Concerns**

The church has consistently failed to address important and relevant life issues particularly ones that are important for young people. As a young person, my son was articulate and sharp-minded and loved in-depth discussion about a faith he was inquisitive about but all he got were attempts to cover up woolly ideas. He found church boring and irrelevant. Now, as an astrophysics student at university, he is appalled by creationist views, and continues to find church a place of 'blind faith'. He said recently, 'I am a reluctant, agnostic atheist who would love to be converted, but no-one has convinced me yet.' The



church has not welcomed or catered for his kind of inquiry. He gets frustrated by Christians who seem to care more about the destiny of his immortal soul than show interest in him as an interesting and creative person.

- **Personal Pain and Confusion**

When a personal crisis occurred within the church my family and I were left intensely hurt and confused. This led to a sense of loss amounting to a bereavement, and we were left feeling disillusioned, stranded and isolated. A process that has raised many questions and new insights. Inevitably, when something occurs that devastates part of one's life there needs to be a process of grieving, reflection and healing, a coming to terms with shattered hopes and plans. What I had not anticipated was the direction in which this would take me as the healing process progressed.

I then discovered 'A Churchless Faith' by Alan Jamieson and was amazed to find that I am not alone in experiencing these things. More than that, Jamieson has described **me** in his book and even managed to articulate parts of my journey that I have been struggling to articulate for many months. This, in turn, is helping me to take ownership of my story. It feels akin to 'coming out' from the closet. Why has it taken so long to admit my story to others? One of the strongest emotions I am aware of is **guilt**. The insistent voice that sits on your shoulder and

says "It is only backsliders who don't go to church". And the idea that I might be *staying away* from church to *enable* my faith to grow is not understood. I was also brought up with a strong theology of 'church'. It is the body of Christ and it is wrong to 'forsake meeting together as some have done'. More guilt! The other strong emotion is one of **loss and loneliness**: a feeling of being shipwrecked and washed up on a desert island. Will another ship ever pass this way? Will I ever have spiritual companions again on the journey, except for my extremely long-suffering husband! On the other hand, do I want to jump on the next ship that passes?

Coming from a background and, maybe also, a personality which values certainties, it is difficult and painful to live with unresolved uncertainties. This is probably why the process of leaving has taken so long. Staying had to get to a point where it was more painful than leaving. It is an unexpected journey, one which I could never have envisaged, and not easy or comfortable. I grieve for the loss of old family comforts and sharing, but also know I cannot go back. Nor can I abandon a faith which means everything to me.

Angie is in her mid fifties and has been a committed Christian all her teenage years and adult life. She has attended evangelical, charismatic churches for over 35 years and has shared the running of a Christian community and ministry with her husband. She is a keen runner which she finds a great help in praying/thinking through current faith issues.

There's no harbour shelter
now
Just open sea, with faint glimpses of land
Left well behind

What bearings on the sea of faith?
Wild winds replace the gentle breeze, still -
Stormy seas provide the best sailing
(Andrew Wheatley)



A Place Transfigured

Leaving a church can be a very painful and difficult decision. It can happen imperceptibly and over a period of time or with a more conscious resolution. Either way it brings with it a dawning sense of loss, re-evaluation of one's beliefs and being on one's own in new and uncharted territory. It is a place that is 'in-between'. No longer the security of the old and familiar and no sense yet of what is to come. Some people have described this as being in free fall, the wilderness or desert experience, or being on the margins. Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild in their excellent book *Guard the Chaos* prefer to name it as the liminal space for very good reasons. They say:

The language and image of marginality does, however, have a negative side to it. To define oneself as marginal is to define oneself in relation to someone else's centre; it is to accept another's definition of how things are. In that sense it may be quite disempowering and in itself alienating. To have one's base and focus on the margins is to have a view of the present and the past; but what of the future?

We want to suggest that liminality offers an alternative and more creative language and image than that of marginality. The image of *threshold* has a more positive ring to it than that of *margin*. Threshold implies future. To be between here and there is to live in the faith that there is a future. To choose to be between here and there is to live in the faith that it will be a better future.¹

This is more suggestive of opportunity and choice, which is much more empowering than the confusion and sense of loss that can so often accompany people when they have left the church. Ward and Wild are not at all denying the grief and confusion that takes place but offer creative and helpful ways of engaging with that. The following excerpts come from their chapter entitled 'A Place Transfigured' (p 87-91).

I recognize that the great advantage bestowed upon me by my marginal situation was that it was also an opportunity. It had the potential to become liminal – that is, to be a threshold to Other and New perceptions.²

The place referred to in the chapter title is the place of change, the place of being between one thing and another, the place that is both exciting and terrifying. It is a place we have also called wilderness.

The wilderness is the untamed, the uncultivated, the life-giving, life-restoring place without which the planet's ecosystem would collapse. Similarly, without spaces of wildness we would shrivel and die, inwardly if not physically...

How do we move from margin to threshold? And having done so, how do we harness the creative potential of this liminal wilderness and limit its disintegrative forces? We suggest there is a process which looks something like this:

• *Recognise the crisis.*

'I believe, but I cannot believe *that*.'

'Going to church gives me a headache.'

'I have faith, but it's not the faith of my "fathers".'

'I want to leave the church, but what could I do, where could I go? I still feel I'm a Christian.'

'I haven't a clue where I'm going any more in a religious sense.'

'I know *something* is important to me, but I've lost a language to describe it.'

'I feel as if God, the church, the whole lot has just died on me.'

¹ Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, *Guard the Chaos: Finding Meaning in Change* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), p. 30.

² Mary Daly, *Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage* (The Women's Press, 1993), p. 46, cited in *Guard the Chaos*; p. 87.

- *Recognise the vision or hope that is in you.*

A sense of crisis is very often felt because of a positive flip-side to this otherwise negative experience. Frustration with the church, for example, is frustration because I have a vision that it does not have to be like this. The community of faith *could* be more open, more adventurous, more relevant. So, what do I hope for? What do I believe is really important? What values do I want to try to live by and how do I want to express them? Do I want to do this with other people who share a similar vision? What is the experience which makes me feel that all this *matters*?

- *Acknowledge the loss.*

What do I both want and fear to lose? A worshipping community? Some old and formerly cherished beliefs? A particular image of God? A place and identity within my local church? My job? My vocation?

- *Say goodbye.*

Try to discern what you need to let go of on this journey of transition and, either on your own or with a small group, participate in some simple ritual of letting go and leaving behind.

- *Create some initial boundaries.*

If you have left a local church, you may find the regular worshipping time on Sunday mornings a real loss. For an hour or so when you would have been in church, set the same time aside for listening to music, going for a walk, meditating, cooking something special – whatever nourishes your soul. Rather than just the hour a week on Sunday, you may want to set some time aside each day in this way. What is important, if it is to provide a sense of boundary and containment at this time of change, is that it is a fixed time and it has priority. You may also want to do some study – perhaps theology that clarifies your own ideas – or write down some of your own reflections. In setting time aside like this you are creating a part of the new container for your religious faith and experience – and you are taking your journey seriously.

- *Building community.*

There is a depressing privatisation of spirituality which mirrors the extreme individualism and egocentricity of western cultures. To think and talk only of 'my journey' and never of 'our journey' is to miss, if not the whole point, then certainly a major part of the point of any religious quest. If there is no *meeting* at the level of faith, it is hard to see how it can be faith at all.

'I miss the chance to be quiet with other women and just sit and contemplate. It's just not the same if you do it on your own.'³

The woman quoted here is describing that sense of meeting.

One of the greatest losses we hear expressed is that of a worshipping community, usually when a person has left a local congregation. The human desire to belong is very strong and churches often provide a sense of community, especially in otherwise rather impersonal cities.

There is pain and struggle, yes, and there is a place beyond that brings new life and opportunity. This practical list offers both acknowledgment and understanding of the space and provides some steps for active engagement.

[Used with permission]

³ A contributor in Rosie Miles, *Not in Our Name: Voices of Women who have left the Church* (Southwell Board of Social Responsibility, 1994), p.49, cited in *Guard the Chaos*, p. 91.



NAKED CRABS

At the seashore every pool and puddle left by the retreating tide seems to have a crab in it. Little ones scuttle sideways, squeeze under rocks, peek from a patch of seaweed, or occasionally venturing out to nibble on unwary human toes.

Now and then you may see bigger crabs in deeper, safer pools. With ponderous majesty they wave huge claws as a warning to stay away.

On the beach shells of crabs lie washed up by waves. Some are from crabs that have died. Others are simply discarded, a dwelling too small for its growing occupant. That's how the crabs grow bigger – when their shells get too tight, they split the shell open and grow a new one.

I've never talked with a crab but I imagine the process of splitting open a shell must be painful. I'm sure that until they grow a new shell they feel terribly defenceless and vulnerable. That's certainly how we humans feel when we crack open our shells. Our shells aren't visible like crabs but they are there just the same – shells formed by years of habit, shells that protect us from other people, shells that are the roles we play as parents, children, bosses or employees.

Every now and then we crack open and emerge into a new world, quivering and defenceless. Teenagers do it as they become adults. No wonder they are crabby sometimes! Adults do it as they learn to quit running their kid's lives, when they get laid off work, when a partner dies and they have to start over again alone, when an investment fails, or when a dream disappears. In all these traumas of life a shell is being broken. A new vulnerable life is started.

Like a crab, the longer that shell has been growing around us, the harder it is to break open and start again and the more painful the breaking becomes. Some of our shells have been worn for generations. Our Christian faith can be a shell handed down through the generations. Some faith shells are worth keeping and others might have become prisons. Shells encrusted with the barnacles of the past, so burdened with trailing weeds and so constricting that we can no longer move when God calls.

No one looks for painful experiences in life or faith. To avoid pain we may prefer to stay locked in shells that no longer fit very well rather than risk the vulnerability of cracking them open. But when a crab's shell becomes too thick, too protective and too tough to crack open and start again, then the crab can't grow anymore. That's when it dies.

So do we.

James Taylor

Book Review

People in Glass Houses: an insider's story of a life in and out of *Hillsong*

Tanya Levin

Black Inc., 2007

People in Glass Houses is a young woman's story of her growing up and early adult years in the beginning days of the Assemblies of God church, which later became known as *Hillsong*. While the writing is only mediocre and it is somewhat on the emotive side, I found it also very thought provoking and there are some good reminders about some of the more toxic elements to faith and church culture.

It was a bit difficult to tell what stance Levin was taking initially as she shifts from warm and nostalgic thankfulness for many of her experiences to humorous one-liners to damning evidence of toxic religion and the damage it did to her. Prosperity doctrine bordering on financial exploitation, sexual misconduct, defined gender roles and strong-arm tactics are all part of the mix in this expose of *Hillsong*.

It is not so much the extremes that interest me in a book like this. They at least bring things to light. It is the realization that tens of thousands of people in the world are sucked into a style of teaching, belief and lifestyle lured by promises that are false. They are false religion, false premise and depict a completely false image of God. People are captured by promises and fear and controlled by guilt. Levin talks about their *Hillsong* practices and the types of people who are most susceptible to them. She says: "The blacks and whites of fundamentalist Christianity make it easily digestible for people who are in any way psychologically disadvantaged. The message is simple, repetitive and emotionally based. Those with alcohol or drug-related brain damage, acquired brain injuries, mental illness, children, the elderly and victims of violence may not have the cognitive functioning required to decipher the simple propaganda they are fed".⁴

Sure, we can write it off as extreme Pentecostalism, but it struck me that take a few steps back from the extreme and many of us also have been exposed to teaching that is incorrect or an over emphasis of one facet of what the Christian faith is about. We may have lived out of teaching, which we later realize has been damaging to our development as people. Women in particular have been fed prescriptive ways of being. And for all of us turning our backs on these may leave a residual feeling of guilt when we no longer obey its demands. One of those, which immediately springs to mind, is the good ol' Protestant work ethic – "I must always be doing. My worth and my value as a Christian is tied up in what I do. Another is that we shouldn't question our faith or have doubts about it and in many churches asking questions or questioning any action of its leaders is tantamount to blasphemy. Or if you do certain things, live a certain way, God will bless you.

The end result for Tanya Levin, at this point anyway, is that she has no faith left. Once the institutional mores were exposed, there was nothing of substance left. Any concept of God and God's involvement in the world that was worth believing in was never taught to her. She couldn't separate the metal from the dross. There was no metal underneath or it was still at a very immature faith stage and consequently fell apart and no one seemed to care.

I see this book as a wake up call - examining our faith and the beliefs we live out of is an essential and healthy thing to do - it makes us aware of the doctrines that we base our lives on, what we convey to other people when we speak of our faith and why we do the things we do.

Jenny McIntosh

⁴ Tanya Levin, *People in Glass Houses* (Black Inc 2007) p.125,126

